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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of post-Communist identity, particularly in the countries that make up what was formerly referred to as the Eastern Bloc. It examines previous work in the field about the development of minority identity through language and provides a historical background about Eastern Europe and Hungary. It describes some of the options for identity formation in post-Communist Eastern Europe and illustrates these options using examples from Hungarian college students' writings and class discussions (the return to nationalism, the realignment with the West, and becoming citizens of the global village). The paper suggests using the notion of minority identity to view a post-Communist society. It concludes that Hungarians are very aware of their need to construct new identities vis-a-vis their relationships to their own history, to both the east and the west, and to the global village. They are also aware of the role that language (both their own language and foreign languages such as English) plays in that identity construction. (SM)

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Part I: Introduction

Even before my Fulbright experience in Hungary, in spring 1999, I was intrigued by the position of Eastern Europe in relation to the West and, since 1989, the possible psychological reconstruction of identity following the re-establishment of Western political and economic institutions. In this paper, I will explore the concept of a post-Communist identity. First, I will look as some work already done in this field, primarily about the development of minority identity through language. Second, I will give some historical background about Eastern Europe and Hungary and suggest using, to some extent, the same notion of minority identity to view a post-Communist society. Finally, I'll look at some of the options for identity formation in post-Communist Eastern Europe and illustrate these with examples from my Hungarian students' writings and class discussions, as well as from other experiences there.

Part II: Identity Research

Much has been written on the issue of identity and identity formation since the 1970s. In SLA, this topic has been of major concern, especially in the last five years. Perhaps the seminal SLA article was one in *TESOL Quarterly* by Bonny Norton Peirce in 1995, followed by her introduction to a special *TQ* issue on identity in 1997, now as Bonny Norton. In this latter article, she describes her view of identity:

> In my own work, I use the term *identity* to refer to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. (1997 p. 410)

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Identity, in Norton's words, is "negotiated, constructed, and conflicted" (412). It constructs and is constructed by language (419).

Part III: Historical Background

My purpose is not to argue the merit of the identity research but is to apply these ideas to a context that I have not seen reflected in the literature, the post-Communist situation, especially the countries that made up what was formerly referred to as the Eastern Bloc.

Much of the work in identity has taken as its context the formation of minority identity in inter-group situations, but not all. For example, Duff & Uchida's (1997) article in the same issue of *TQ* looked at native English-speaking and non-native Japanese-speaking EFL teachers in Japan. Still, most articles I've looked at have concerned themselves with issues of identity among immigrant and minority group members in the Anglophone world—the U.S., Canada, Britain, Australia, i.e., Kachru's "first circle" countries (1985).

My first idea has to do with, to what extent can we compare post Communist with these sorts of post-colonial situations? There are obvious important differences, such as race; more will be mentioned later.

For now, let's look at the similarities. As you know, the end of World War II left Europe divided into polarized East/West spheres of influence and occupation. By the end of the 1940s, Communist governments were established in the Eastern bloc, completely monopolizing political and economic life along with cultural-educational-religious institutions.

A basic tenet of Marxism/Communism was the establishment of a classless society, with a united proletariat overthrowing "bourgeois" and aristocratic people, institutions, ideas, and habits. The effect of this focus included a strong anti-nationalist, so-called "internationalist," stance. As such nationalistic thinking was seen as bourgeois, Eastern Europeans were no longer to think of themselves as Poles, Hungarians, etc., but simply as Marxists.

Several events from my Fulbright semester, illustrate this nicely. During my Fulbright orientation, Dr. Tibor Frank, a professor of history and director of the School of English and American Studies at one of the schools I taught at, gave a lecture on Hungarian history. He structured his lecture around the celebration of holidays in Hungary—which ones had been celebrated during the Communist years and which ones since. For instance, several national Hungarian holidays were not allowed to be celebrated while Communist holidays, such as International Workers Day, were mandatory. Since 1989, however, holiday celebrations again include national holidays, while May Day is no longer the holiday it was.

Another illustration was when a Fulbright colleague of mine presented a talk at a Fulbright conference in Berlin. His specialty was public art and public monuments, and he reviewed some of the new monuments that had gone up since 1989. For instance, the Battle of the Don Bend had taken the lives of almost an entire Hungarian army—200,000 men—before the Battle of Stalingrad, in Russia, in 1943. Since the Hungarians, however, had been on the wrong (German) side, no public monument had ever been erected, no public mourning had been allowed. A monument has recently been put up.

We can see from these examples, then, that one thing that Hungarians—and other Eastern Europeans —got back after 1989 was their own history, their own identities. In fact, Hungarian social scientist Gyorgyi Csepeli argues just this in his article "National Identity in Post-Communist Hungary":

> There are many alternative interpretations of the recent abrupt changes in Eastern Europe. . . . [W]e would like to offer an interpretation indicating that, as a result of the changes, historical continuity has been re-established in Eastern Europe. At last, the people of this historical wasteland have got back their history. (p. 231)

This stealing of history, then, is an important similarity between post-colonial and post-Communist situations, that Hungarians were made minorities in their own country under fifty years of Communist control. Of course, other important distinctions are lacking—race, the fact that populations have moved or have been moved from an ancestral homeland. But others—the pervasiveness of the system, the absolute power it held over most persons' public and private lives, the consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of a few, all remind us of the situations of minorities in the first circle countries.

Another important difference is that, suddenly, it was all over, almost overnight. The Berlin Wall fell, was felled, within a few hours, mimicking in reverse its overnight construction in August of 1961. In Hungary, as in other countries, new, open elections were quickly held. To be sure, things had been changing during the 1980s, especially in Hungary, which had one of the most lenient forms of Communism after the failed revolt in 1956; so-called "goulash communism"—centralized command economy

combined with some aspects of a free market. But the system did change quickly, and without the issue of race to be dealt with, average Hungarians suddenly had to think of themselves in new terms.

So, we can identify '89 as the end of Communism and emphasize the political and economic changes—free elections and free markets—but perhaps the most basic change was felt at the level that it was generated at, among the people themselves and with their need to construct new identities.

Let's examine some of the options available.

Part IV: Hungarian Identity Choices

1. A Return to Nationalism. Since Hungarian nationalism had been denied for fifty years, a natural place to look would be back to their pre-Communist days for a new identity basis. In some ways this has been the easiest choice, since Hungarians had been and still are a rather nationalistic people; they forged their identity over the centuries, first as triumphant tribesmen from Asia establishing a new nation in the heart of Europe in the 10th-15th centuries, but then as victims of various neighbors--the Turks, the Austrians, the Germans, . . . the Russians—ever since.

In fact, Csepili writes, "Many actors and observers of the current Eastern European scene now think that everything is to be started anew, as if the recent decades (1945-1989) were to be excused from history" (p. 232).

However, that identity is not without problems, especially nowadays. Of course, things have greatly changed since World War II and such nationalistic tendencies are suspect in the West. For example, neither the intolerance toward Roma (Gypsies) nor

anti-Semitism, both held at bay by the Communists, has disappeared. In fact, the rise of the right in Eastern Europe has alarmed many in the last few years.

For instance, in his book *Free to Hate*, journalist Paul Hockenos describes the opening of a "Pandora's Box of age-old antagonisms, ethnic racisms, and historic rivalries" (p. 4). Although new governments in Eastern Europe "all boast constitutional democracies, regular elections, and varying measures of press freedom," he writes, "[t]he kind of democracy that has emerged. . . is a far cry from that in postwar Western Europe." And, he continues, while such right-wing groups certainly exist in the West (the Klu Klux Klan, France's National Front, Italy's Northern League, etc.), those groups "dwell on the periphery of the political process" (p. 7). On the contrary, he notes that

> In Eastern Europe, parties with similarly racist and even shriller nationalist rhetoric find themselves squarely within the political mainstream, if not in power. They are talked about as "normal" and "natural" phenomena. . . , as part and parcel of democracy, and not as threats to it. (p. 7)

Similarly, political scientist Vladimir Tismaneanu at the University of Maryland writes in his book *Fantasies of Salvation* that, in fact, even as zealous nationalism was freed by the defeat of Communism, it has been appropriated by the ex-Communists themselves. "The ex-communists have created gigantic networks of influence, preserved or restored many of the old patterns of hypercentralized state controls over the economy and the media, and embraced nationalism as a convenient ideological substitute for the defunct Leninism" (p. 4). And he, too, describes as frightening situation:

> Eastern Europe . . . is thus an accumulation of noble hopes, emancipating

dreams of national dignity and, in the same vein, a region marred by many unfulfilled vindictive fantasies and excruciating neuroses. None of its economic or social problems was solved by the four (or seven) decades of communism; instead, they were exacerbated and distorted. (p. ix-x)

My students, too, as introspective as most Hungarians, noted the downside to nationalism. Here one student, in fact, contradicts this notion of a return to a previous era:

> The progress of Hungary's history has been so slow and contradictory that it is . . . . [no] wonder why [the] Hungarian people do not feel the significance of . . . important historical events. Hungary has changed the nature of ... state power [,] [f]rom a monarchy . . . [to] a parliamentary democracy. Thus Hungarians do not see a direct and obvious link between past and present. . . . Hungary struggled its way through revolutions (1848, 1956) and complete overthrow of political rule (1989). Hungary has gone through so many changes that people remember only symbols and stories of the history that is not our present anymore.

2. *Western re-alignment.* Of course, another possibility for identity is a re-alignment with the West. In addition to re-establishing ties with traditional friends in Central Europe—most notably Austria and Germany—newer economic alliances are being formed with other Western European countries—Holland, France, Britain, Scandinavia. And it did not take U.S. companies long to jump on the opportunities suddenly available in the Eastern European markets.

The alliances with the West were, of course, desired and welcomed. After all, it was the open societies and higher standards of living in the West that were especially attractive to Hungarians. And we should also mention their historically Western orientation since the early days of Hungarian history, when King, later Saint, Stephen welcomed the Pope's emissaries, established Roman Catholicism as the state religion and the Latin alphabet for the writing of the Hungarian language. In fact, the eleven years since the changeover from Communism has been often referred to as "reintegration with the West."

In fact, many students voiced positive views of the West, including travel stories and interest in American and British film and music. Here is one student's example:

> She was 14 years of age when she first saw a documentary film about the Rolling Stones. That was the first time she saw Mick Jagger in her life and it was one of the most important moments in her life as well. She felt a kind of inexplicable devotion towards him and towards his music. . . . Her other interesting characteristic is that she adores British English and the English people. When she got to know that Mick was a born Englishman, she found it natural and almost obligatory to focus on British English more than anything. She became a real enthusiast of England and Great Britain.

Still, the 180-degree shift from East to West has not been without its problems. For instance, the full-scale cultural invasion of businessmen, English teachers, and tourists was probably more than the Hungarians bargained for. Before '89, American music, especially the blues, was poignantly popular throughout Eastern Europe as it

expressed the people's almost hopeless situation against an oppressive regime. Blues remains popular, only now it has a new opponent. I remember one young woman passionately singing a Billie Holliday song, while standing on a corner in a quaint artists' village near Budapest that has since become an overly popular tourist destination.

And some Western attitudes are simply hard for Hungarians to adopt, such as ethnic tolerance. In fact, at a Hungarian-Romanian Fulbright meeting I attended, one of my Fulbright colleagues lectured the Romanian audience that in addition to welcoming various cultural objects from the West—jeans, food, music, films—they should embrace the concept of multiculturalism. However, many Hungarians feel that not only was their own cultural identity squelched for fifty years, but also that of Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. After all, Hungary, unlike the West, did not colonize anybody; instead, they see themselves as being the victims of imperialism, what with the Trianon Treaty after World War I, which placed these large numbers of Hungarians as minorities in neighboring countries. Hungarians simply do not feel the PC (post-colonial) guilt that many of us in the West feel.

One student alluedes to this feeling when comparing her childhood in Transylvania with her present home in Pecs:

> Nagyvarad is in Transylvania, very near to the Hungarian border. In a sense it is more Hungarian than Transylvanian; since it is situated on the Hungarian Plains, its political relations were stronger with the mother country. After the conclusion of peace in Trianon in 1920, this state changed. Nagyvarad [has been] a part of Transylvania, and, unfortunately, of Romania ever since. . . .

. . . . The people of Nagyvarad haven't been allowed to live free as Hungarians for more than 70 years, and this oppression has naturally had the . . . result . . [that] they have become conscious of their nationality and their identity. If they wanted to survive, they had to remain Hungarians.

. . . . If one chooses to stay there, one also chooses limited or non-existing opportunities, low-paying jobs and no reputation.

Western feminism, in some ways, is also difficult to translate into Hungarian terms. Of course, feminism has somewhat of a bad name in many parts of Western Europe as well—but the history of attitudes toward women in Marxist countries is complex. Communist policies (e.g., the principle of women's equality in building a socialist state) led to an increase in women's educational access and large-scale entry into employment outside the home (Wolchik p. 120). However, much of this was not accompanied by men's increased involvement in domestic work at home (p. 123), which together with poor economic conditions, increased stress on women and resulted in a large decline in the birth rate by the 1960s (p. 125). This caused the government's policies toward women to change; women's domestic roles were re-emphasized and pro-family subsidies such as child allowances and extended maternity leaves were instigated. Ironically, by the 1980s, the dissident position on women was similar to the official government line (albeit for different reasons) (p. 127). Thus, the changes in 1989 did not significantly affect attitudes toward women's status. A belief in women's traditional role in the home is widespread in Eastern Europe, and few women identify themselves as feminists.

My students, almost all female, were typical, I think. Many believed a balance was possible between career and family without espousing feminism per se. Here are some responses written to an essay by Susan Sontag called "Beauty":

> I personally agreed with most of Susan Sontag's argumentations although I found her a little bit perhaps too feminist. But it is not a question that the ideas she pointed out are realistic and objective. Not being a feminist I would not agree with all her rather negative evaluation of the social phenomena mentioned in the essay.

> I really enjoyed the article ["Beauty"] because, though written by a woman, I could not really feel any feminist approach in it.

> Now, I have to add that I completely agree with Susan Sontag's ideas, and I found her article enjoyable and interesting. Her approach of the term "beauty" shows some feminist characteristics, but I think nowadays it is unavoidable..."

In truth, Hungarians are fairly ambivalent about their relationship to the West. Their geo-political position as the border between the wild east and the "civilized" West has caused Eastern Europeans on many occasions to sacrifice themselves to Eastern invaders—the Slavs, the Turks, the Muslims—while defending the West. One student's description of this follows:

> The past 1000 years of Hungary's history can be best understood if we see the country as being on the borderland of east and west, at the point of interference

of two different cultures. Being in between does not only mean a specific geographical location, which explains why most major threats to West European civilization became reality here, but also interprets Hungary's choices as answers to the inevitable dilemma of where to belong to.

This dilemma was already present at the time of the foundation of the Hungarian state. Then, the question was whether to join the Roman or the Byzantine Christian culture. There were times in our history when we had no choice: the Tatars came without us inviting them, the Turks settled here for 150 years on their way to Vienna. At other times, when we had, and had to make choices, the opposing political forces were fighting for orientation to one side or the other: joining the Third Reich in World War II and trying out the communist model are examples of this. Today the dilemma is still with us. Shall we belong to the western democracies, or build a mockery of them? I hope this time we make the right choice, and it will have lasting effects.

Ambivalence toward joining two Western institutions—NATO and the EU—can be understood in this light. As much as the government pushed for NATO inclusion, the average Hungarian is not so sure he wants to be on the frontier of the West again. The irony that within a few weeks of the ceremony (here in Missouri, by the way) that extended NATO into Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, NATO was dropping bombs on their southern neighbor, Yugoslavia, and doing so to defend the Muslim inhabitants of Kosovo, was not lost on many Hungarians.

Tismaneanu's description of the post-Communist ambivalence toward the West is even more visceral and illustrates the suspicion some Eastern Europeans feel toward the West and any Western plans to fix their problems:

> The most important thing the East Europe experience provides is knowledge that the region's citizens saw and endured radical evil in pure form. They know much too well the threats involved in any project of compulsory happiness, in the utopias of classless or ethnically "clean" societies. . . . During the post-1989 decade of transition, . . . an East European caveat emerged: beware self-appointed prophets, distrust mankind's charismatic benefactors . . . .(p. x)

3. Joining the Global Village? A third identity possibility is present as well, to become citizens of the "global village." This, too, is looked at with mixed feelings, as it is connected to Hungary's relation to the West. On the one hand, positive aspects are welcome, such as electronic communications. Also, the learning of English has a strong international, rather than national, appeal for Hungarians, who must learn it along with other foreign languages, as few people learn theirs. When I asked students why they were learning English, many responded that it gave them access to so much outside their country. At least a couple of them hoped to teach English in the Third World.

On the other hand, like people in many small countries, some Hungarians are suspicious of the move toward homogenization. This fear is not just that they will loose more than they gain in the shuffle, but is a very visceral fear for their very identity and survival. Here is one student's response to an essay by Pico Iyer on globalization:

I agree with Iyer's basic idea of the world going global and at the same time it makes me frightened that my descendants will not be able to define the notions of "Hungary" and "being Hungarian." . . .

. . . . In the streets the young are roaming dressed according to the latest trends, the beauty salons are to meet the claims of the clients who want to follow the general expectations dictated by the world-famous stars. Besides fashion, the dish antennas, newspapers, movies and the Internet transport us ideologies, trends, a window to the world. . . .

The question is how it is possible to be able to become inhabitants of "The Global Village" without losing either our national image or self-esteem. It can be carried out only at the cost of many internal and external conflicts. . . .

Part V: Conclusion

The concept of post-Communist identity, at least in Eastern Europe, is not an easy one, then. In relation to Bonny Norton's definition of identity, Hungarians are very much aware of their need to construct new identities vis-à-vis their relationships to their own history, to both the East and the West, and even to the global village. I think they are aware of the role that language—their own as well as their learning foreign languages, like English—plays in that identity construction, especially as they look to the future.

So, in conclusion, let me read from one more student paper in which the writer mused on the razor's edge that is Hungarian identity:

Even if he looks bored and tired during university days, I think he has found

something that is worth [carrying] on for. Even if the opportunities of a Hungarian student set strict limits on his fantasies, I think he has found a small lane between optimism and pessimism.

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